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The Ancient Ones are Visited: The Anasazi and Mesa Verde National Park

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Anasazi culture can still teach us a few lessons

Terry Jamison

I am drawn to Mesa Verde National Park. I made another trip there a few weeks ago. It was time to take a break from the job search, to recharge my batteries, to get ready to resume teaching.

The brochure offers this description. "Mesa Verde National Park, which occupies part of a large plateau rising high above the Montezuma and Mancos Valleys, preserves a spectacular remnant of a thousand-year-old culture. We call these people the Anasazi, from a Navajo word meaning 'the ancient ones.' Ever since local cowboys discovered the cliff dwellings a century ago, archaeologists have been trying to understand the life of these people.

"But despite decades of excavation, analysis, classification, and comparison, our knowledge is still sketchy. We will never know the whole story of their existence, for they left no written records and much that was important in their lives has perished. Yet for all their silence, these ruins speak with a certain eloquence.

"They tell of a people adept at building, artistic in their crafts, and skillful at wresting a living from a difficult land. They are evidence of a society that over the centuries accumulated skills and traditions and passed them on from one generation to another. By classic times (A.D. 1100 to 1300), the Anasazi of Mesa Verde were the heirs of a vigorous civilization, with accomplishments in community living and the arts that rank among the finest expressions of human culture in ancient America."

Mesa Verde was home to the Anasazi cliff dwellers. They prospered in this wild

country of mesas and steep-walled canyons. They hunted, raised crops and babies, and lived in the area for several hundred years. Then abruptly they left.

I had two experiences during my

stay which contributed much to rejuvenating me. I was strolling down from my room at Far Point Lodge in the early evening to have dinner. It had rained briefly then cleared, producing that unique, lovely light that only happens after a rainstorm.

Then I saw them, standing there in that wonderful light. Two deer, also hungry, were dining on the leaves of some bushes. They were immediately aware of me but seemed comfortable with continuing their evening meal. I stood watching, absorbing the soft, quiet beauty of nature, feeling very privileged.

Then I got a half dozen shots with my Pentax. At times the deer seemed to be posing. I got one shot with both of them looking right at me. I am very grateful that just when we need it, the Great Spirit treats us to a moment like this.

The other experience did not enter my awareness until mid-morning the next day. I was enjoying a leisurely drive around the park, stopping occasionally to shoot pictures. I felt relaxed and, hmmm, safe. As I thought about it, I realized that the subtle feeling of safety derived from having slept the night on top of the mesa. It was a very powerful sense of what the Anasazis must have felt living there. They lived on remote mesas surrounded by steep canyons. Their dwelling on the cliffs, of course, were easily defended from attack. From a top the mesas, they could see for miles, further contributing to the sense of safety.

Feeling safe is a significant human need. I was glad to feel it and bring it home with me. My thanks to the Great Spirit for sharing the magic of Mesa Verde. I'll be returning as needed.

Terry Jamison teaches part-time at Arapahoe Community College.



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